

In Confirmation of Prophetic Interpretation

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On January 8, 1981, the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists asked the General Conference Biblical Research Institute (BRI) to form a special committee to restudy the books of Daniel and Revelation. BRI responded by forming the Daniel and Revelation Committee (DARCOM), chaired by Richard Leshner who, at the time, was director of BRI. Leshner continued to serve as chairman of the Daniel and Revelation Committee even after George Reid replaced him as director of BRI upon Leshner's becoming president of Andrews University in 1984. Initially composed of 21 members (among whom I was privileged to be included), the committee eventually peaked at 25.

Like other ad hoc committees formed by the General Conference, DARCOM would normally have been disbanded at the General Conference session subsequent to its formation, that is, in 1985; but at the chairman's request it was authorized to continue until the 1990 session.

During its nine and a half years of existence, DARCOM has met at least once a year, usually on a college or university campus in order to encourage participation by the local religion faculty. In 1987 we met at Marienhöhe, the Seventh-day Adventist college in Darmstadt, Germany. In 1988 we met at Newbold College in England. March 14-18 this year we met at Oakwood College, and on May 4-6 at Andrews University.

The Daniel and Revelation Committee has gone about its work by assigning topics to its own members and also to scholars who are not members. When the papers have been ready, the authors have read them aloud to the other members, who have reacted to them with questions and suggestions, and the authors have been invited to revise their papers in response. At the close of a typical annual session the committee members have reviewed the papers and decided which ones seemed to make a sufficiently substantial contribution to deserve publication. DARCOM claims no authority to require all Adventists to interpret the Bible precisely alike, but because it senses a serious responsibility to be helpful, it has attempted to publish only those papers that reflect a general consensus of the committee. Thus far it has published collections of papers sufficient to make up five volumes¹ and it hopes to put out two more. All volumes are made available at the lowest possible price and certainly deserve widespread attention.

The rigorous scholarly methods imposed on one another by the members of the committee have led to fruitful suggestions for improving certain minor aspects of Seventh-day Adventist prophetic interpretation; but these same rigorous methods have also resulted in stronger support than ever for the main aspects of Adventist interpretation. This is true not only for the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation but also for the message of Hebrews—for in view of the importance of the heavenly sanctuary to an understanding of Daniel and Revelation, several papers² were assigned to the study of the book of Hebrews.

With this introduction, let me touch briefly on a few of the highlights of the committee's research that are related closely to the book of Revelation.

1. Year-day Principle.

Volume 1 of the *Daniel and Revelation Committee Series* of publications contains two chapters by William H. Shea on

the year-day principle: "Year-day Principle—Part I" and "Year-day Principle—Part II." Pastors and ministers who worry that the "year-day principle" is based only on Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6 can discover in these two articles no fewer than 23 *kinds* of Biblical evidence pointing to the interpretation of a symbolic day as a literal year. In addition to providing this much Biblical evidence, Shea's chapters also show that, outside the Bible, Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman periods—including authors of the Dead Sea scrolls—also made use of the year-day principle.

Inasmuch as Shea's material has been available since 1982, little more need be said about it here. Suffice it to say that the Daniel and Revelation Committee has found abundant evidence to confirm the year-day principle and thereby to support the standard prophetic dates, 1798 and 1844.

2. Basic Chiastic Structure of Revelation.

That Revelation was composed as a literary chiasm was discovered one step at a time by Kenneth A. Strand of Andrews University while analyzing Revelation over a period of twenty years. Strand has presented his discovery in *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*.³ In 1975 he also presented it to an enthusiastic audience at the quinquennial History of Religions Convention in Britain.

The Daniel and Revelation Committee has in general accepted Strand's research and considers the chiasm a valuable hermeneutical tool.

The concept of "chiasm" does not need to frighten people. The word itself (KIE-asm) is short enough, and the concept which it embodies is quite easy to understand. It means simply that selected key elements which are introduced in the first half of a document are *reintroduced in reverse order* in the second half of the document. Instead of being organized in the sequence A B C D, the normal order in modern western writing, key elements in Biblical and classical times were often arranged in the sequence A B B' A' or A B C B' A'.

Couples who sit together in church form a chiasm when the wives sit together and their husbands sit outside them. The chiastic sequence in this instance is first husband, first wife, second wife, second husband. One can visualize a chiasm any time by spreading the fingers of both hands, placing the thumbs together, and naming off the digits from the left little finger to the left *thumb*, then from the right *thumb* to the right little finger.

Although chiasms are unknown to most Christians today, scholars have been discovering them in the Bible since at least 1818, the first appearance of T. H. Horne's three volume set, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scripture*. In 1953 Oxford University published a work by John L. Myres⁴ showing convincingly that even the *Histories* of Herodotus were written in chiastic form! To be sure, the actual events of history do not occur in a neat chiastic sequence, but in ancient times a literary genius like Herodotus—or like John the Revelator—could organize in chiastic order the literary elements in his *recounting* of history.

Before I read Strand's book I was skeptical that it could prove to me that Revelation is organized as a chiasm; but the evidence quickly convinced me, just as it has convinced most of the members of DARCOM.

The *first* division of Revelation deals with seven churches located in seven different cities, troubled by heresy and persecution, and much in need of warnings and promises. By contrast, in the *final* division of Revelation we find the church united, dwelling at peace (the gates are never closed) in a single city, New Jerusalem, with everyone enjoying the fulfillment of God's promises.

The *second* division of Revelation (the seven seals) has responding elements in the *second-from-the-end* division of the book (the millennium). For instance, the souls of God's beheaded saints seen under the altar begging for justice in the

fifth seal are seen during the millennium seated on thrones, themselves doing the judging. And so on.

The members of the Daniel and Revelation Committee consider the chiastic structure of Revelation a valuable tool when evaluating Dispensationalist eschatology, so popular among American Evangelicals. Dispensationalist eschatology has encouraged the idea that in Revelation only the seven churches survey the course of history from the prophet's day to the end of time. It says that the rest of the book—the seals, the trumpets, the deadly wound, and the 1260 days as well as the seven last plagues and the fall of Babylon—are all unfulfilled prophecies confined to the *future and the end time*.

But when Revelation is seen as a chiasm, the shift from historic-survey prophecy to unfulfilled end-time prophecy does not come at the end of the seven churches, where Dispensationalism sees it. The shift comes instead after the three angels' messages at the end of chapter 14 and before the seven last plagues of chapters 15 and 16. This is precisely where Seventh-day Adventists in the past have always found the shift, even without the benefit of understanding chiasms.

Discovery of Revelation's central chiasm has helped authenticate a major basis for Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of prophecy.

3. Sound Use of the Writings of Ellen G. White.

Because the interpretations offered by Ellen G. White are of significance to Seventh-day Adventists, DARCOM asked Jon Paulien to prepare a paper on "Ellen White and the Exegesis of Revelation: The Seals and the Trumpets."

Most Seventh-day Adventists are aware of such rules as (a) taking into account the *time, place, and circumstances* of an Ellen White message, (b) taking into account the *general tenor* of her writings, and (c) trying to *discover the principle* involved in a given statement. Paulien's paper assumes these basic rules and goes on to offer some new ones addressed specifically to those passages in which Ellen White uses Bibli-

cal words or phrases. Paulien's observations may loosely be summarized this way:

First, when Ellen White uses phrases and sentences from the Bible, we should determine carefully whether her intention is to do exegesis and discuss the *actual meaning* of the passage that the words come from, or whether she is merely *using phrases* that are suitable for expressing her own inspired thought.

An example is Ellen White's frequent use of the clause, "I will make a man *more precious* than fine gold." The clause as she uses it is taken from Isaiah 13:12 in the King James Version. But the Revised Standard Version of Isaiah 13:12 gives the clause as "I will make men *more rare* than fine gold," and the context shows that this translation is to be preferred. Isaiah was predicting a future destruction that would result in such a depletion of population that men would become rare indeed (and *therefore* precious).

Examination reveals that Ellen White's use of the passage was not intended to serve as exegesis or commentary. Instead, she found the KJV phraseology useful for expressing God's high evaluation of the *redeemed*,⁵ of Christian *character*,⁶ and of a well-disciplined *family*.⁷ This illustrates the rule that we should distinguish mere use of phraseology from exegetical and other possible uses.

Second, we should allow Ellen White's later writings to clarify her earlier ones. As her writing skills improved, her ability to express accurately and clearly the thoughts she received from God improved correspondingly. When an occasional early statement became the subject of controversy, she would offer a clarification. A well known example of this is found in *Early Writings*, pp. 85-86, where she explains her earlier statement that believers would proclaim the Sabbath more fully "at the commencement of the time of trouble."

A more complex illustration of using her later writings to interpret her earlier ones is found in comparing something she said on pp. 279, 280 of *Early Writings* with her later

treatment of the same theme in *The Great Controversy*, p. 613. In *Early Writings* she wrote,

An angel with a writer's inkhorn by his side returned from the earth and reported to Jesus that his work was done, and the saints were numbered and sealed. Then I saw Jesus, who had been ministering before the ark containing the ten commandments, throw down the censer. He raised His hands, and with a loud voice said, "*It is done.*" And all the angelic host laid off their crowns as Jesus made the solemn declaration, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still [etc.]."

Some of the language in this passage is reminiscent of Ezekiel 9 (the writer with the inkhorn who comes back to report) and of Revelation 16:17 (the words, "It is done," spoken with a loud voice).

But the passage is of special interest to Seventh-day Adventists because some readers think the words "threw down the censer" are an allusion to the angel at the golden altar in Revelation 8 who "cast" his censer "into the earth" before the seven angels sounded their trumpets. These readers use the *Early Writings* passage to argue that the seven trumpets all occur after the close of probation.

So let us examine the statement closely, looking first at what it does and does not say and then analyzing it in the light of a later similar statement. As we look at the statement closely we find that it says nothing at all about the trumpets of Revelation 8, or about the golden altar in Revelation 8. Nor does it speak of an angel's casting down a censer. The person who throws the censer down is Jesus, and the location of His action is the ark in the most holy place. We are impelled to assume that Ellen White had no intention here of exegeting Revelation 8:1-6; she but borrowed a single convenient phrase.

Now let us apply the rule of allowing a later writing to elucidate an earlier one. Let us see how this *Early Writings* statement appeared some decades later in *The Great Controversy*, p. 613:

An angel returning from the earth announces that his work is done; the final test has been brought upon the world, and all who have proved themselves loyal to the divine precepts have received "the seal of the living God." Then Jesus ceases His intercession in the sanctuary above. He lifts His hands and with a loud voice says, "It is done"; and all the angelic host lay off their crowns as He makes the solemn announcement: "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still [etc.]."

We observe that the basic point of the statement from *The Great Controversy*, p. 613 is identical to the basic point of *Early Writings*, pp. 278, 280, namely, that when the sealing work is finished an angel will report the fact and Jesus will cease His intercession. And we observe that two-thirds of the wording is the same in both statements. But we also note that significant changes have been made. The later passage omits entirely the phrases from both Ezekiel 9 and Revelation 8:5. Evidently when revising the *Early Writings* statement into its later *Great Controversy* form, Ellen White did not feel that the phraseology of Revelation 8:5 was needed to express her thought.

Thus we conclude that her early statement (in *Early Writings*, pp. 279, 280) was *not* intended by Ellen White to constitute an exegesis of Revelation 8:5.

It seems apparent that when revising the *Early Writings* statement, Ellen White wanted to avoid giving the false impression that the close of probation is the same as the work described in Ezekiel 9. Apparently she also wanted to avoid giving the impression that the close of probation is the same as the angel's casting down a censer in Revelation 8:5. Thus the *Early Writings* statement should not be used to prove that the trumpets all follow the close of probation. Thus there is nothing in *Early Writings* to disturb the well established Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of the seven trumpets as spanning the sweep of history from John's day to the end of time.

In his DARCOM paper Jon Paulien had much else to say

on the general topic of a responsible use of Ellen G. White, but we move to other matters.

4. Inauguration Not Judgment in Revelation 4, 5.

In fairly recent DARCOM meetings, two papers were read attempting to show that Revelation 4 and 5 describe the investigative judgment. But the members of DARCOM, though giving the papers their close attention, were not convinced by them. They indeed felt a strong sympathy for the authors' conviction that Bible prophecy—in Daniel 7 and 8 and many other places—foresaw the investigative judgment. They just have not been convinced that the investigative judgment can be found in Revelation 4 and 5.

The argument that Revelation 4 and 5 must be the investigative judgment is based largely on similarities between these chapters and Daniel 7:9-14. In both passages the Father and the Son are mentioned, there is at least one book and one throne, and ten thousand times ten thousand angels also appear.

But what about the differences?

In Daniel 7 Jesus arrives dramatically as the Son of man on the clouds of heaven, whereas in Revelation 5 He just appears when needed.

In Daniel 7 the books (plural) are opened *before* the Son of man appears, whereas in Revelation 5 the book (singular) remains closed—thoroughly closed, seven-seals closed—until *after* the Lamb appears. And whereas the scene in Daniel 7 is specifically referred to as a judgment three times (in 7:10, 22, 26), the word “judgment” does not appear even once in Revelation 4 and 5.

After a thorough analysis, the Daniel and Revelation Committee recommends the view that Daniel 7:9-14 and Revelation 4-5 describe two different events, both involving the same personnel but each occurring at a distinctly different time. Daniel 7 clearly refers to the investigative judgment, but the songs and other content indicate that Revelation 4-5

pertains to Christ's inauguration in the heavenly sanctuary following His resurrection.

5. The Gospels Rather Than the Churches as Matrix for the Seven Seals.

Seventh-day Adventists have always seen the seven seals as spanning the course of history from John's day to the end of time, just as the seven seals do, and the four major prophecies in Daniel. There is no reason to depart from this historic position on the seals. But when interpreting the seven seals we have attempted to parallel them one by one with the seven churches—and in doing so have sensed at times an incompatibility. The rider on the white horse is obviously a symbol of gospel purity, but Ephesus, having lost its first love, is not so certainly a pure church. The rider on the red horse is given a sword to kill with, a concept just the *opposite* of the persecuted (rather than persecuting) Smyrna church. And it has always been difficult to parallel the half-hour silence of the seventh seal with anything Revelation 3 says about Laodicea.

Thus it was a matter of great interest when DARCOM first took up the seven seals to discover that several members of the committee had privately begun to compare the seven seals with the gospels rather than with the churches. More specifically, they were comparing the seven seals with the lineup of events given in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, the "Olivet Discourse" or "gospel apocalypse."

Think of Matthew 24 for a moment. The gospel is to be preached in all the world from Christ's day to the end of time. And throughout history there are to be wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and pestilences. Here we have the four horsemen, white for the gospel, red, black, and sickly green for war, famine, and pestilence. (War, famine, and pestilence are actually named as the definition of the three colored horsemen in Rev 6:8.)

In Matthew 24 we also have the great tribulation, fol-

lowed by signs in sun, moon, and stars and the appearing of the Son of Man. Similarly, in Revelation 6 we have (in the fifth seal) the souls of God's persecuted saints crying under the altar, followed (in the sixth seal) by signs in sun, moon, and stars, and the appearing of the Son of man.

Comparing the seven seals to Matthew 24 rather than to the seven churches makes not a whit of change in their theological significance and none either to the concept of prophetic fulfillment. But I can testify say that when I have tried following the DARCOM recommendation and have presented the seals in parallel with Matthew 24, I have felt far more confident and convincing than when attempting to present them in parallel with the seven churches.

DARCOM's suggestion that we relate the seven seals to the gospel apocalypse (or Olivet Discourse) rather than to the seven churches serves to confirm—and improve—our long-standing interpretation of the seals.

6. The Seven Trumpets.

At its latest few meetings the Daniel and Revelation Committee has taken up certain details about the interpretation of the seven trumpets. The members are solidly convinced that the trumpets began in John's day and extend to the end of time, that is, that their fulfillment is continuous throughout church history—just as the fulfillment of Daniel 2 is continuous, the fulfillment of Daniel 7 is continuous, the fulfillments of Daniel 8 and 11 are continuous, the fulfillment of Matthew 24 is continuous, and the fulfillment of the seven churches is continuous, and of the seven seals.

(a) The seven trumpets like the seven seals occur in the first half of the Revelation chiasm, along with the seven churches and the great controversy scenes (Rev 12-14), all of them survey-of-history prophecies. The trumpets do not occur in the second half of the Revelation chiasm, which is confined to end-time events.

(b) The fifth trumpet contains an extensive time prophecy

(the "five months" of Rev 9:5)—not to mention "the hour, the day, the month, and the year" (Rev 9:15) of the sixth trumpet—which on the year-day principle cannot possibly be confined to the end time.

(c) Only the seventh trumpet reaches to the end time, for under it "the mystery of God" will at last be "fulfilled" (Rev 10:7).

(d) It is under the seventh trumpet that God's "wrath" appears (Rev 11:18)—and God's wrath is the seven last plagues (Rev 15:1). The seven plagues are not the same as the seven trumpets. The seven plagues constitute only a small portion of only the seventh trumpet.

(e) And to anyone looking to *Early Writings*, pp. 279, 280, for evidence that the trumpets follow the close of human probation, the Daniel and Revelation Committee points out, as we have seen above, that this passage says nothing about the golden altar, the angel standing at the altar, or about the seven trumpets, and when Ellen White revised the statement for *The Great Controversy*, she removed even the hint of Revelation 8:5.

7. Other Matters and Conclusion.

Richard Davidson has presented the Daniel and Revelation Committee with some very helpful insights into the use of sanctuary imagery in the book of Revelation. I omit further comment because he himself is presenting a paper on this theme at this meeting of the Adventist Theological Society.

Various other papers are still in preparation, on the United States in Prophecy, the mark of the beast, the millennium, and several other topics. They—and the five volumes already published—deserve widespread recognition and use.

The serious work of the Daniel and Revelation Committee during the past nine and a half years has done much to confirm—and to refine—the essentials of long-standing Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of prophecy.

Endnotes

1 The five volumes are: vol. 1, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*; vol. 2, *Symposium on Daniel*; vol. 3, *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*; vol. 4, *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*; and vol. 5, *Doctrine of the Sanctuary: A Historical Survey (1845-1863)*.

2 See vol. 4 in note 1 above.

3 Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, rev. and enl. ed. (Naples, Florida: Ann Arbor Publishers, Inc., 1970, 172, 1976, 1979). This work originally appeared as *The Open Gates of Heaven*.

4 Compare George E. Duckworth, *Structural Patterns and Proportions in Vergil's Aeneid: A Study in Mathematical Composition* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), which says of Vergil's *Eclogues* that "certain *Eclogues* in the second half of the collection correspond to poems in the first half, and in reverse order."

5 As in the Ellen G. White Comments, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 5:1150.

6 As in Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 87.

7 As in Ellen G. White, *Adventist Home*, p. 32.